

Matilde Passigli Bonaventura

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From Madrid she moved to Italy, to the city of the man she had married, and so gave up acting and singing to become a wife and mother in Florence. In 1939 they fled to Jerusalem, where her husband, professor Enzo Bonaventura, expelled from the University of Florence, had obtained a post at the Hebrew University. She too had sought work for herself at once, but Matilde did not begin teaching at the University until after the proclamation of the state of Israel, or rather after she had been tragically left on her own with three adolescent sons.

A young women in Madrid

Born in Palma de Mallorca on 28 February 1895, the daughter of Alfredo J. Passigli and Emma Medina, sister of Saeed and Mercedes (later in married life García Gonzales), Matilde belonged to a Jewish family related by marriage in some way to the Bonaventura family, although the precise relationship is unknown. Her (possibly) second cousin Enzo Bonaventura had come to Madrid to ask for her as his wife when he decided it was time for him to marry. Their wedding was celebrated in the Jewish rite on 14 February 1921: Matilde was nearly 26 and her husband was almost thirty¹.

In Madrid, where she had grown up, she had studied at the Lycée de Jeune Filles de l'Alliance française, an organization founded for the spread of the French language abroad, and there she had pursued university level studies in classical subjects, Latin, art and singing. As an actress and singer she had taken part in several productions at the Teatro de la Comedia in Madrid².

With her marriage and her move to Florence she interrupted her artistic

¹ See the wedding invitation sent by the couple to Professor Francesco De Sarlo, Bonaventura's teacher, in the private archive of F. De Sarlo, Florence, to whom my thanks.

² On her personal success as a young actress, see *Noticias*, «A.B.C.», 3 July 1912, p. 19 <<http://hemeroteca.abc.es>> (accessed 28 March 2019).

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activities. She moved from her childhood home, at 18 Calle de Relatores, to Florence, where Enzo was living in via Ricasoli 24, near the Istituto di studi superiori pratici e di perfezionamento, in whose Faculty of Arts he was a senior lecturer and supervisor of the experimental psychology laboratory. The couple later went to live below the hills at Fiesole, in viale Volta 173, and subsequently in via Fra' Giovanni Angelico 67³.

A trip, and then life in *Eretz Israel*

In August 1924, with her husband Enzo and the Florentine lawyer Alfonso Pacifici, who like him was a disciple of Rabbi Samuel Hirsch Margulies, Matilde - the only woman in the group - took part in a trip to Palestine organized by the Italian Zionist Federation⁴. On 1 January 1925 David, their first son, was born; in April 1928 Manolo (Emanuel) and in May 1936 Daniel. They would have liked to bring up all three in *Eretz Israel*, her husband wrote on 8 November to Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organisation, when he received the official communication that he had «qualified» in Hebrew. Looking to obtain a position for himself in Palestine, where many of their acquaintances in the Jewish community were coming round to the idea of going and taking the decision to leave Italy, Enzo left for Jerusalem in March 1939⁵ while she remained in Florence with the three children and her in-laws. With a *Palestine immigrant certificate* issued by the Department of immigration in Jerusalem on 20 September 1939⁶, Matilde and

3 Bonaventura's address appears from Reale Università degli studi di Firenze, *Annuario per l'anno accademico 1929-30*, Firenze, Chiari, 1930, and then in Professor Bonaventura's personal file, see BLO, MS, SPSL, b. 471/3.

4 The first trip by Italian Jews to Palestine. The departure from Trieste, «Israel», 28 August 1924.

5 Patrizia Guarnieri, *The Zionist Network and Enzo Bonaventura: from Florence to Jerusalem*, in Ead., *Italian Psychology and Jewish Emigration under Fascism*, New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016, pp. 113-153.

6 The date on the *Palestine immigrant certificate*, Department of immigration, Jerusalem, 20 September 1939, in the Asheri-Bonaventura private archive, would seem to be the correct date of arrival, which actually appears as October 1939 in the index of Arturo Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere. Gli ebrei italiani e l'emigrazione in Palestina*, Genova-Milano, Marietti, 2003, pp. 364-365.

her sons joined Enzo and she adjusted to her varied life as a woman, wife and mother. She also started to work outside the home, as much from choice as from need. From 1940-41 she took on teaching Spanish at the Jerusalem Berlitz Schools, in 288 Herzl Road⁷.

When she arrived in Palestine she was 34 years old, and at just 44 she became a widow. Her husband Enzo, who «despite being 56 years old stood guard duty at the university three days a week», was killed in the notorious ambush of 13 April 1948 on the road to Mount Scopus, a Jewish enclave in the Arab zone where the university and the hospital were both sited, and it was their convoys which were attacked. British soldiers intervened only seven hours into the attack, and the dead numbered more than 60.

It was a terrible blow for the community and for the victims' families. «Mrs Bonaventura is very low but makes an effort for the sake of her sons», Paola Cividalli wrote to her father Gualtiero on 15 April 1948⁸.

Satisfaction in her work

The year after, Matilde began to teach at the Hebrew University: «an excellent Spanish teacher», attested the director of the Jerusalem Berlitz School, which had her on its staff for about nine years.

She possesses a deep knowledge of the language she instructs. Mrs Bonaventura is the most conscientious and painstaking teacher, and has always managed to get the best results. She is very popular with her students, who seem to work harder when she gives the lessons. We sincerely wish her the success she so richly deserves,⁹

wrote the director in ending her glowing reference to professor Peri, director of the University's Romance Language Department.

In 1952 Matilde Bonaventura obtained a bursary offered by the Spanish

⁷ As shown by a reference written in English by the director of the Berlitz Schools of Jerusalem, 31 July 1949, copy in the Bonaventura private family archive.

⁸ The letter quoted is in Gualtiero Cividalli, *Dal sogno alla realtà. Lettere ai figli combattenti. Israele 1947-1948*, Firenze, Giuntina, 2005, p. 128.

⁹ Letter in English from the director of the Berlitz School to Professor Peri, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 31 July 1949, copy in the Bonaventura private family archive.

government to take part in an advanced level course in Spanish language and literature from 1 February to 31 May at the University of Salamanca, on the recommendation of the director of her department, who offered to stand in for her teaching duties without charge for her period of absence from Jerusalem¹⁰. She appears to have been on the academic staff at the Hebrew University until 1963, when she reached the age of 68, although no details of this long professional activity have been traced¹¹.

After her husband's death she saw to the publication of his posthumous edition of *Psicoanalisi*¹². She maintained her links with Italian culture, actively attending the Società Dante Alighieri of Jerusalem, evidently into the late 1970s. She was awarded the Society's diploma of merit for the spread of Italian language and culture, with a silver medal in 1963 and a bronze medal in 1980¹³.

She passed away on 29 February 1984, in Jerusalem.

10 Letter in Hebrew from the director of the department to the rector of the Hebrew University, 7 January 1952. Copy provided and translated into English by Rachel Bonaventura Snir.

11 On the request of her grandchildren seeking her personal file at the Hebrew University, there was a statement from the director of personal, Yitskak Hafouta, on Matilde Passigli Bonaventura's membership of the HU on 14 March 2019, of which I have a copy. She is mentioned as Bonaventura's wife by Eva Telkes-Klein, *L'université hébraïque de Jérusalem à travers ses acteurs. La première génération de professeurs (1925-1948)*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2004, pp. 152-153.

12 On this there are some letters; see Matilde Passigli Bonaventura to Mondadori, 21 February 1950, in CAHJP, P191, *Archivio Enzo Bonaventura e famiglia*, f. 10, «Varia», 1945-50.

13 Notes taken from the account written by her granddaughter, Rachel Bonaventura Snir, to the author, 25 October 2018.

Archival sources

- Bonaventura private archive, Tel Aviv-Jerusalem, by kind consent of Daniel Asheri and later Rachel.
- CAHJP, P191, Archive of Enzo Bonaventura and family, f. 10, «Varia», 1945-50.

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Cite as:

Patrizia Guarnieri, *Matilde Passigli Bonaventura*, in
Ead., *Intellectuals Displaced from Fascist Italy. Migrants, Exiles and Refugees
Fleeing for Political and Racial Reasons*,
Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2019-
<<http://intellettualinfuga.fupress.com/en>>
e-ISBN: 978-88-6453-872-3
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Date of publication: 1 March 2020.